

## Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy Questions and Answers

### **1. What is the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and why was it developed in the first place?**

The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy was the first comprehensive statement of wildland fire policy coordinated between the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture. The policy provided clear direction on important issues of safety, the role of fire in natural resource management, and the relative roles of federal and non-federal agencies in the Wildland Urban Interface. The policy was developed in response to several incidents, including the severity of the 1994 fire season, during which 34 firefighters died.

### **2. Why was the 1995 Federal Fire Policy reviewed?**

The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy recognized for the first time the essential role of fire in maintaining natural systems. As a result, federal agencies increased the use of wildland fire to treat fuels significantly over the last few years. In the aftermath of the Cerro Grande Fire, which started as a prescribed fire and eventually burned 48,000 acres and 200 homes in Los Alamos, New Mexico in May 2000, the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture requested the group that developed the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy to reconvene to evaluate the policy and the status of its implementation and to make recommendations for improvements.

### **3. Who conducted the review?**

The Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture asked that the Working Group that developed the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy be reconvened. The structure and membership of the earlier group was replicated as nearly as possible, using as many of the same individuals as available. As in 1994-95, the Working Group was co-chaired by the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior. Principal agencies from these two Departments included the Forest Service from USDA and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service from the USDI. The review also included the Environmental Protection Agency, National Weather Service, Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), and FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration. In recognition of the importance of wildland fire in other agencies, the Departments of Energy and Defense and the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Geological Survey were invited to join the working group. In addition, the National Association of State Foresters was invited to join the group to represent the important perspectives of non-federal wildland fire agencies.

## Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy Questions and Answers (continued)

### **4. How was the review conducted?**

The working group reviewed a wide variety of material, including reports from wildland fire management agencies on the status of action items assigned in the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy; internal and external reports, reviews, studies, and investigations of various aspects of wildland fire; statistical and other descriptive sources of information about wildland fire scope and activity; short papers or oral presentations on specific issues developed by professional staff; and a Brookings Institution survey of fire managers, resource managers, and agency administrators around the country regarding their views on adequacy and implementation of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. In addition, the working group considered comments on the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and its implementation from employees, who were invited to provide their views through a Web site, and non-governmental organizations, who were sent letters requesting their views.

### **5. Why weren't many action items from the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy implemented?**

There are several reasons why many parts of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy have not been implemented. The items that have been implemented least successfully are those that require coordination and agreement among agencies or across disciplines within agencies. This partially stems from organizational and cultural barriers to working across program and agency lines and partially stems from the lack of an effective means of overseeing and evaluating implementation of fire policy. Also, after attempting to implement the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, it has become apparent that some items could not or should not be implemented as originally written. In addition, there is little evidence that managers have been held accountable for implementation of the policy.

### **6. What makes you think it will be implemented better this time?**

The working group reviewed each of the 83 specific action items in the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. Aspects that were found to be unclear or unrealistic were revised to make it possible to implement. Some items were found to be no longer appropriate for action and have been dropped. In addition, the working group found that currently there is no effective means of overseeing and evaluating implementation of the Federal Fire Policy especially across agency and program lines. A policy statement on evaluation has been added to emphasize the critical need for regular, ongoing evaluation of policies and procedures. In addition, the implementation action item on program management also calls for the creation of an interagency, interdisciplinary

## Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy Questions and Answers (continued)

### **6. (continued)**

mechanism at the senior level to ensure that fire policy is implemented effectively, efficiently, and in a timely manner throughout the federal government.

### **7. What specifically has been fixed or changed to prevent a Los Alamos fire or similar scenario from happening again?**

Subsequent to the Cerro Grande Fire, two investigations were conducted, including one by the General Accounting Office. Each of these concluded that the underlying Federal Fire Policy was not the cause of the escape of the prescribed fire. Each review included recommendations for improving operational and program management elements of the wildland fire program. The Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Fire Policy did not address specific operational or program implementation issues, but focused on broader policy goals and issues. The 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Policy contained in the report will strengthen some of the weaknesses that lead to the Cerro Grande Fire, including increased emphasis on planning and multi-agency coordination. However, most of the findings and recommendations from the investigations address operational, not policy, matters. Those recommendations are now being reviewed by both Departments to determine how to best incorporate into wildland fire operational procedures.

### **8. What will happen next?**

All agencies with fire management related programs and activities in the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture have been directed to adopt the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, which replaces the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy as appropriate through directives, manuals, handbooks, and other documents. Other federal agencies participating in the review will need to take similar action.

### **9. Why haven't fire management plans been completed in many areas?**

Federal agencies that have not completed fire management plans cite a variety of reasons for not getting the work done. The most common are heavy workloads with other competing mandatory tasks and lack of skill and training in developing these types of plans among wildland fire management employees.

## Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy Questions and Answers (continued)

### **10. How does the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy mesh with the National Fire Plan?**

The 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy provides the philosophical and policy foundation for all aspects of wildland fire management on federal lands, including the use of wildland fire in managing natural resources, wildland fire suppression, and wildland fire rehabilitation and restoration. The National Fire Plan is a plan that contains specific actions the federal government is taking to enhance wildland fire management. The National Fire Plan is consistent with and complimentary to findings and recommendations contained in the Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Policy.

### **11. How can the public get involved in wildland fire management?**

The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy require that fire management plans be completed for every acre of federal land with burnable vegetation. These plans are developed based on the underlying land use or resource management plan, such as a Forest Plan or a Resource Management Plan. In any case, fire management plans will be developed in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, which provides for public involvement.

### **12. What will happen with the policy since the administration is changing?**

Since the review was conducted by a large, diverse group of professionals from many different federal agencies and from many different wildland fire and natural resource disciplines, it is anticipated that the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy will be implemented by the incoming administration.